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ABSTRACT

This report documents the problem of educating students with serious emotional disturbance, reviews the legislative and administrative background, and identifies seven strategic targets in a national agenda for these children. The magnitude of the problem is supported by data on these students concerning academic outcomes, graduation rates, school placement, school absenteeism, dropout rates, encounters with the juvenile justice system, and identification rates of students of varying socio-economic backgrounds. The legislative and administrative background includes Part C of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act and activities of the Office of Special Education Programs. The report then discusses the following seven interdependent strategic targets: (1) expand positive learning opportunities and results; (2) strengthen school and community capacity; (3) value and address diversity; (4) collaborate with families; (5) promote appropriate assessment; (6) provide ongoing skill development and support; and (7) create comprehensive collaborative systems. Three cross-cutting themes are also stressed: first, collaborative efforts must extend to initiatives that prevent emotional and behavioral problems from developing or escalating; second, services must be provided in a culturally sensitive and respectful manner; and, third, services must empower all stakeholders and maintain a climate of possibility and accountability. (DB)

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ED 376 690

NATIONAL AGENDA FOR ACHIEVING BETTER RESULTS FOR CHILDREN AND YOUTH WITH SERIOUS EMOTIONAL DISTURBANCE

Prepared by the
Chesapeake Institute
for the
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Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services
Office of Special Education Programs

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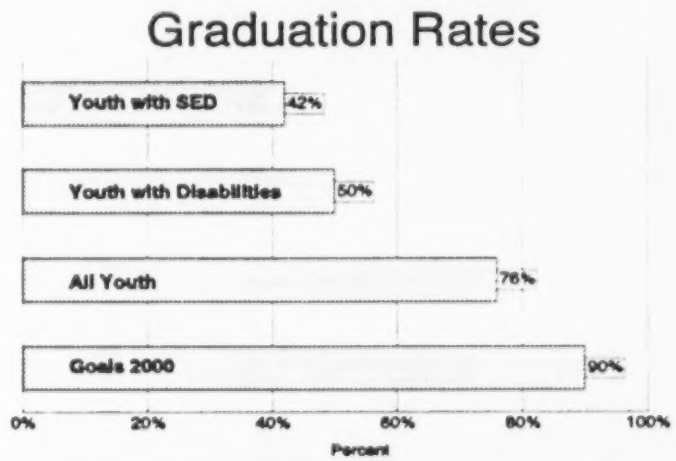
NATIONAL AGENDA FOR ACHIEVING BETTER RESULTS FOR CHILDREN AND YOUTH WITH SERIOUS EMOTIONAL DISTURBANCE

The Problem

Effectively serving and meeting the needs of children and youth with serious emotional disturbance (SED) and their families is a national concern. The necessity of addressing the needs of these children and youth has become increasingly apparent. Failure to do so threatens the success of the nation's educational objectives (e.g., GOALS 2000) and limits life-long opportunities for many individuals. The following data suggest the magnitude of the problem:

- Academic Outcomes. Students with SED have lower grades than any other group of students with disabilities. They fail more courses and they more frequently fail minimum competency examinations than do other students with disabilities; they also are retained at grade level more often at the end of the school year. High school students with SED have an average grade point average of 1.7 (on a four-point scale), compared to 2.0 for all students with disabilities and 2.6 for all students. Forty-four percent received one or more failing grades in their most recent school year (compared to 31 percent for all students with disabilities). Of those who took minimum competency tests (22 percent were exempted), 63 percent failed some part of the test.

- Graduation Rates. Forty-two percent of youth with SED earn a high school diploma, as opposed to 50 percent of all youth with disabilities and 76 percent of similarly aged youth in the general population.

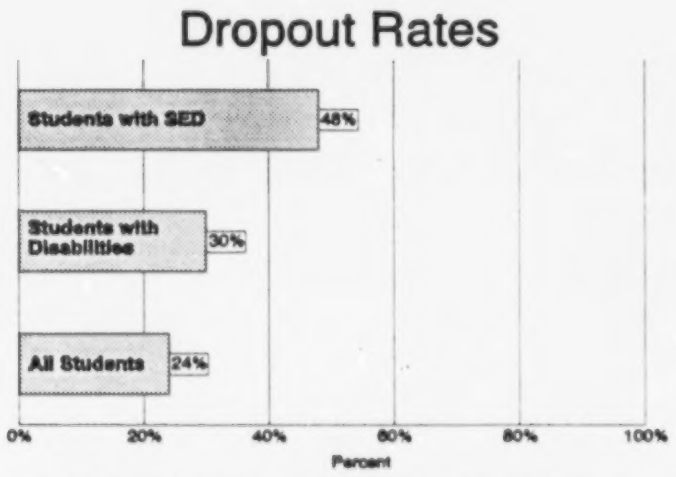


SOURCE: *Youth with Disabilities: How are They Doing: The First Comprehensive Report from the National Longitudinal Transition Study of Special Education Students* (1991).

- School Placement. Eighteen percent of students with SED are educated outside of their local schools, compared to 6 percent of all students without disabilities. Of those in their local schools, fewer than 17 percent are educated in regular classrooms, in contrast to 33 percent of all students with disabilities.

- School Absenteeism. Students with SED miss more days of school per year (an average of 18 days) than do students in any other disability category.

- Dropout Rates. Forty-eight percent of students with SED drop out of grades 9 through 12, as opposed to 30 percent of all students with disabilities and only 24 percent of all high school students. (Another 8 percent of students with disabilities, including students with SED, drop out before grade 9.)



SOURCE: *Beyond the Report Card: A Report from the National Longitudinal Transition Study of Special Education Students* (1993) and *Youth with Disabilities: How are They Doing?*

- Encounters with the Juvenile Justice System. Twenty percent of students with SED are arrested at least once before they leave school as opposed to 9 percent of students with disabilities and 6 percent of all students. Fifty-eight percent of youth with SED are arrested within five years of leaving school, as opposed to 30 percent of all students with disabilities. Of those students with SED who drop out of school, 73 percent are arrested within five years of leaving school.

- Identification Rates of Students of Varying Socio-Economic Backgrounds. The rates of identification of children and youth with SED vary across racial, cultural, gender, and socioeconomic lines. Although African-American and white students represent 16 and 68 percent of the school age enrollment respectively, they represent 22 and 71 percent of the students classified as SED. On the other hand, Hispanic-Americans and Asian-Americans represent 12 and 3 percent of the school-aged population respectively, but only 6 and 1 percent of the students classified as SED. Data also suggest that students from low-socioeconomic backgrounds are over-represented and female students underrepresented among those identified with serious emotional disturbance.

Compared to all students with disabilities: (1) students with SED are more likely to be placed in restrictive settings and are more likely to drop out of school; (2) their families are more likely to be blamed for the student's disability and are more likely to make tremendous financial sacrifices to secure services for their children; and (3) their teachers and aides are more likely to seek reassignment or leave their positions.

The Legislative and Administrative Background

In 1990, Congress authorized a new program for children and youth with SED under Part C of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). IDEA mandates provision of a "free appropriate public education" (FAPE) for children with disabilities. IDEA also mandated a participatory planning process, involving multiple stakeholders in the development of program goals, objectives, strategies, and priorities for all programs administered by the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP), including the new program for children and youth with SED.

In order to help frame and guide the planning process, OSEP defined its mission as "Achieving Better Results for Individuals with Disabilities," and identified four initial goals to achieve that mission. These goals were:

- To provide and maintain an adequate number of qualified personnel;
- To develop the capacity to ready systems to meet the needs of changing populations;
- To secure and expand access and inclusion for children with disabilities; and
- To identify measures and improve outcomes for individuals with disabilities.

OSEP's Division of Innovation and Development (DID), which administers the SED program, also developed mission and vision statements to guide programs for students with SED. The Mission is: *Achieving better results for students with serious emotional disturbance*. The Vision is: *A reorientation and national preparedness to foster the emotional development and adjustment of children and youth with or at risk of developing serious emotional disturbance, as the critical foundation for realizing their potential at school, work, and in the community*.

OSEP used the initial goals, mission and vision statements to implement a strategic planning process that had three objectives: (1) to develop a national agenda that would focus the attention of educators, parents, advocates, and professionals from a variety of disciplines on what must be done to encourage, assist, and support our nation's schools in their efforts to achieve better outcomes for children and youth with serious emotional disturbance; (2) to provide recommendations for DID initiatives and funding opportunities aimed at providing better outcomes for children and youth with SED; and (3) to provide background for the IDEA-authorized program for children and youth with SED. This planning process incorporated one-on-one interviews, literature reviews, focus groups, stakeholder meetings, an interactive national teleconference, presentations, and the solicitation of oral and written responses.

Strategic Targets and Cross-Cutting Themes

Significantly improving results for children and youth with SED requires a vision of transformed service systems, reoriented professional attitudes, and an emphasis on positive outcomes. Toward these ends, OSEP and the participants in the planning process identified the following seven interdependent strategic targets:

THE STRATEGIC TARGETS

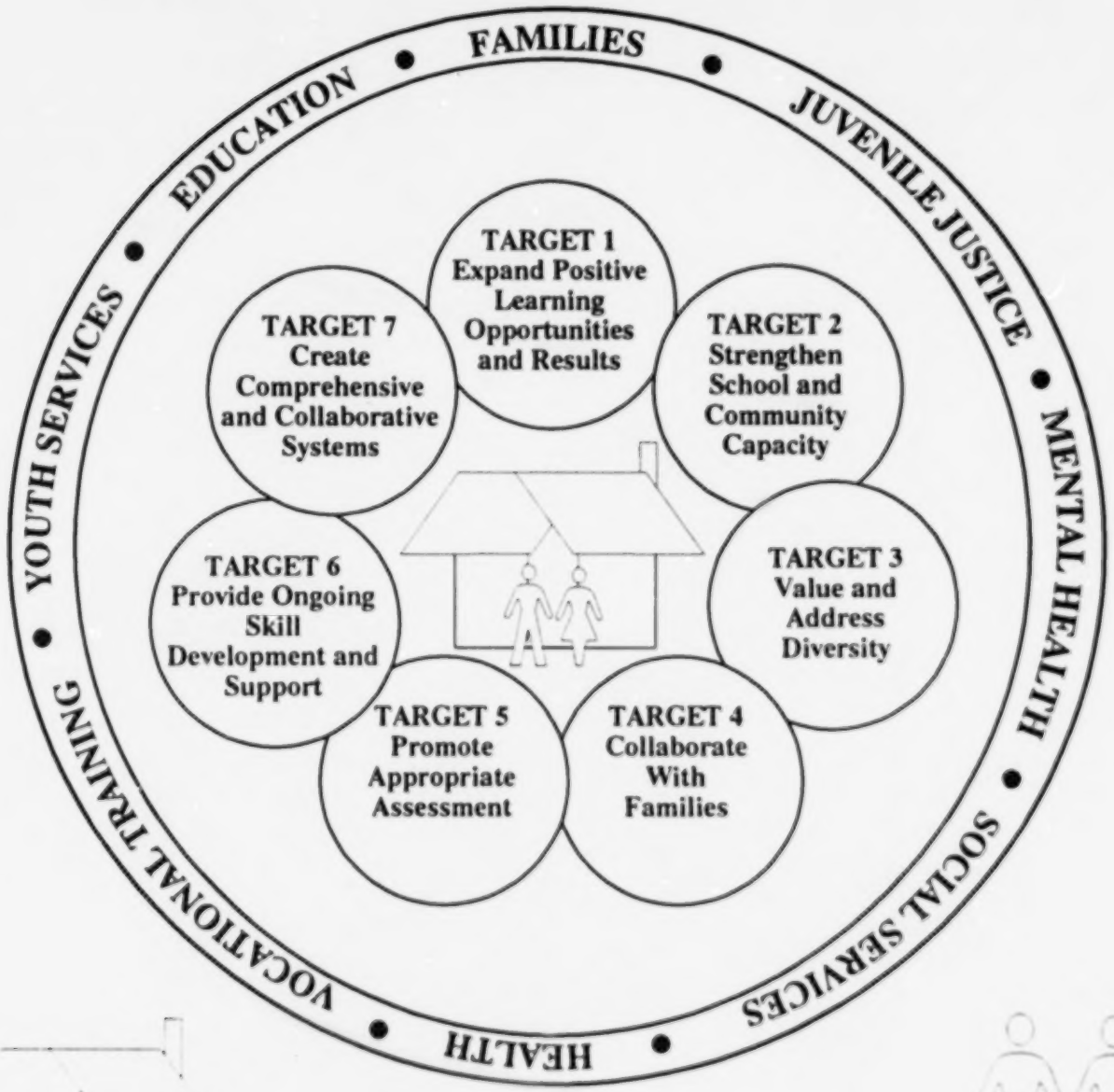
- ✓ *Expand Positive Learning Opportunities and Results*
- ✓ *Strengthen School and Community Capacity*
- ✓ *Value and Address Diversity*
- ✓ *Collaborate with Families*
- ✓ *Promote Appropriate Assessment*
- ✓ *Provide Ongoing Skill Development and Support*
- ✓ *Create Comprehensive and Collaborative Systems*

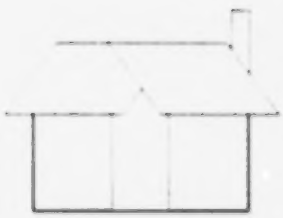
Underlying the seven targets are several key assumptions that embody an understanding that a flexible and proactive continuum of services must be built around the needs of children with SED and their families. Furthermore, services must not only be available, but must be sustained and comprehensive, and must collaboratively engage families, service providers, and children and youth with serious emotional disturbance. Finally, both the needs of these children and increasing demographic diversity of our nation call for cross-agency, school- and community-based relationships that are characterized by mutual respect and accountability — with the child always in focus. Accordingly, OSEP identified the following three cross-cutting themes that reflect this understanding:

- Collaborative efforts must extend to initiatives *that prevent* emotional and behavioral problems from developing or escalating;
- Services must be provided in a *culturally sensitive and respectful* manner; and
- Services must *empower* all stakeholders and maintain a climate of possibility and accountability.

The strategic targets developed for the national agenda for children and youth with serious emotional disturbance are linked. Each target can be best understood and implemented in concert with the other targets and in the context of a collaborative process, as is suggested in Figure 1, "National Reorientation and Preparedness to Achieve Better Results." Achieving successful outcomes for children and youth with SED depends on pursuing and attaining all of the targets listed in Figure 2.

REORIENTATION AND PREPAREDNESS TO ACHIEVE BETTER RESULTS





SCHOOL AND COMMUNITY RESULTS
- Community Strength
- Family Preservation
- Fiscal Efficiency
- Teacher Retention
- School Effectiveness

STUDENT RESULTS
- Improved Grades
- Enhanced Learning
- Higher Graduation Rates
- Increased Equity
- Successful Transition to Adult Roles

COLLABORATE → IMPLEMENT TARGETS → ACHIEVE RESULTS

FIGURE 2

NATIONAL AGENDA FOR ACHIEVING BETTER RESULTS FOR CHILDREN AND YOUTH WITH SERIOUS EMOTIONAL DISTURBANCE

TARGET #1: EXPAND POSITIVE LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES AND RESULTS

To foster the provision of engaging, useful, and positive learning opportunities. These opportunities should be result-driven and should acknowledge as well as respond to the experiences and needs of children and youth with serious emotional disturbance.

TARGET #2: STRENGTHEN SCHOOL AND COMMUNITY CAPACITY

To foster initiatives that strengthen the capacity of schools and communities to serve students with serious emotional disturbance in the least restrictive environments appropriate.

TARGET #3: VALUE AND ADDRESS DIVERSITY

To encourage culturally competent and linguistically appropriate exchanges and collaborations among families, professionals, students, and communities. These collaborations should foster equitable outcomes for all students and result in the identification and provision of services that are responsive to issues of race, culture, gender, and social and economic status.

TARGET #4: COLLABORATE WITH FAMILIES

To foster collaborations that fully include family members on the team of service providers that implements family focused services to improve educational outcomes. Services should be open, helpful, culturally competent, accessible to families, and school- as well as community-based.

TARGET #5: PROMOTE APPROPRIATE ASSESSMENT

To promote practices ensuring that assessment is integral to the identification, design, and delivery of services for children and youth with SED. These practices should be culturally appropriate, ethical, and functional.

TARGET #6: PROVIDE ONGOING SKILL DEVELOPMENT AND SUPPORT

To foster the enhancement of knowledge, understanding, and sensitivity among all who work with children and youth with and at risk of developing serious emotional disturbance. Support and development should be ongoing and aim at strengthening the capacity of families, teachers, service providers, and other stakeholders to collaborate, persevere, and improve outcomes for children and youth with SED.

TARGET #7: CREATE COMPREHENSIVE AND COLLABORATIVE SYSTEMS

To promote systems change resulting in the development of coherent services built around the individual needs of children and youth with and at risk of developing serious emotional disturbance. These services should be family-centered, community-based, and appropriately funded.

STRATEGIC TARGET 1: EXPAND POSITIVE LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES AND RESULTS

To foster the provision of engaging, useful, and positive learning opportunities. These opportunities should be result-driven and should acknowledge as well as respond to the experiences and needs of children and youth with serious emotional disturbance.

The poor outcomes achieved by students with serious emotional disturbance cannot be successfully addressed by focusing on these students alone. Their poor success rates and frequent removal from mainstream classes and regular schools reflect school and community factors, as well as the nature of their emotional needs. Often student behavior escalates out of control and academic failure occurs before schools intervene. Intervention is often limited to external control, with little attention given to internal development of self-control, self-management, self-advocacy, and conflict resolution skills.

Students with SED must be engaged in culturally responsive, student-centered opportunities to learn, marked by high expectations and tailored to their individual needs. Curricula, instruction, and extra-curricular activities must build academic and social skills that enable students to sustain appropriate learning and behavior. School- and community-based learning must be better coordinated so that these students acquire and maintain the academic and social skills which will make them literate, productive, and responsible members of their communities.

This target supports coordinated initiatives that improve the effectiveness of teachers, families, schools, and other agencies to teach and contribute to the academic, social, and emotional development of students with SED and those at risk for developing SED. These students should have access to challenging curricula, effective teaching, and robust learning experiences that enhance their academic, vocational, and social skills. Proactive approaches emphasize prevention, early intervention, and learner-centeredness. Collaborative learning environments respond to the needs of all students, teach both academic and social skills, and build on each student's strengths and interests. The target calls for providing opportunities for success that will enable students with SED to develop the knowledge, skills, and attitudes essential for educational, social, and workplace achievement.

STRATEGIC TARGET 2:
STRENGTHEN SCHOOL AND COMMUNITY CAPACITY

To foster initiatives that strengthen the capacity of schools and communities to serve students with serious emotional disturbance in the least restrictive environments appropriate.

Students with behavioral problems and serious emotional disturbance are often removed from regular schools and general education settings. Their removal reflects many factors, including the current school environment and the need to provide complex and comprehensive services across many service delivery systems. Placements made out of neighborhood schools and communities are often very costly to communities and disruptive to families. In addition, these placements may prevent many students from developing the academic and social competencies they require to use throughout their lives.

This target calls for serving children and youth with SED in the least restrictive and most appropriate environments. In particular, and as far as possible, it means developing the capacity to successfully integrate these students into neighborhood schools and regular classrooms. To make integration and transitions work, students with SED and the teachers who work with them require support and resources. Educational systems must be prepared to facilitate integration and smooth the transition of students back into their own homes, schools, and communities.

This strategic target calls for the development and the expansion of initiatives that improve the readiness and capacity of general education settings to educate and provide needed services to students with SED. This target supports early intervention, prevention, and pre-referral initiatives such as early screening, teacher consultation, and mainstream assistance teams. It supports active collaborations among regular and special educators, service providers, and families that enable these students to learn and participate in activities with their peers. Existing initiatives that address these goals include: providing field-based training to regular educators; using special educators as consultants; reducing teacher-student ratios; implementing non-traditional methods of dispute resolution; adopting approaches to discipline that keep students in class; teaming special educators in classrooms with regular educators; and bringing mental health specialists into schools.

STRATEGIC TARGET 3: VALUE AND ADDRESS DIVERSITY

To encourage culturally competent and linguistically appropriate exchanges and collaborations among families, professionals, students, and communities. These collaborations should foster equitable outcomes for all students and result in the identification and provision of services that are responsive to issues of race, culture, gender, and social and economic status.

The rates of identification, placement, and achievement of children and youth with emotional and behavioral problems vary across racial, cultural, gender, and socioeconomic dimensions. Incomplete understanding of differences can lead to the misidentification and inappropriate treatment of children. To avoid misidentification and inappropriate treatment, diversity must be addressed and valued. To value diversity is to acknowledge, understand, and appreciate the characteristics of different cultures and different groups of people. To address diversity is to develop the ability to work successfully with people of diverse backgrounds when designing and implementing services for children with serious emotional disturbance.

This target calls for approaches that improve the capacity of individuals and systems to respond skillfully, respectfully, and effectively to students, families, teachers, and other providers in a manner that recognizes, affirms, and values their worth and dignity. To accomplish this, the target supports collaborations among families, professionals, students, and communities that identify and provide what are defined as culturally competent services to address the needs of children and youth with serious emotional disturbance.

Cultural competencies describe the interpersonal skills and attitudes that enable individuals to increase their understanding and appreciation of the rich and fluid nature of culture and of differences and similarities within, among, and between cultures and individuals. Furthermore, cultural competency is not merely a set of tools learned at one point in time and applied over and over again. Rather, it is a process that educators and other service providers must learn to adapt to each new individual encounter.

Culturally competent approaches recognize the cultural grounding of teachers' and service providers' views, behaviors, and methods. These approaches also recognize the power of language and attend to the communicative styles of students and their families. Culturally competent approaches address culturally based definitions of family and networks. They view family and community as critical parts of a student's support system. Such approaches also demonstrate a willingness and ability to draw on community-based values, traditions, customs, and resources. Pre-referral and preventive approaches that are culturally competent and linguistically appropriate recognize and nurture the strengths — individual and cultural — that students bring to school.

STRATEGIC TARGET 4: COLLABORATE WITH FAMILIES

To foster collaborations that fully include family members on the team of service providers that implements family focused services to improve educational outcomes. Services should be open, helpful, culturally competent, accessible to families, and school- as well as community-based.

Families represent a child's most intimate support system, and yet familial support and participation in service systems have historically not been a priority. In fact, families have often been held responsible for their children's problems. Today, families of children and youth with SED often serve as their children's advocates and case managers, negotiating between and among the education, health, mental health, substance abuse, welfare, youth services, and correctional systems.

Family support services are frequently a key factor in successfully addressing the needs of children and youth with SED. The degree of family support is especially related to the success of least restrictive placements, as success may depend upon a family's ability to obtain the educational, mental health, and other services required to maintain a child in the home. Training that enables family members to advocate effectively for these students is also an important element in successful placement of students with SED. To improve outcomes for these children and youth, service providers must collaborate with families and support the active participation of families in planning and evaluation.

Collaborating with families and strengthening their access to required services is central to realizing the goal of implementing appropriate, integrated services across education, mental health, and other systems. Service providers should seek and facilitate active parental involvement when planning assessments and when determining what services to provide. The object of this strategic target is to reorient family-school interactions to build a partnership in which service planning reflects the input of families' goals, knowledge, culture, and, in some cases, need for additional services.

Any collaborative relationship should be marked by a demonstration of respect and compassion for family members; an understanding and an accommodation of different styles of social interaction; the use of straightforward language; creative outreach efforts; respect for families' cultures and experiences; providing families with crucial information and viable options; and the scheduling of IEP meetings at convenient times and places for families, care givers, and surrogates. In addition, families may need respite care and day care to meet the needs of their other children. Necessary services may also include counseling, training, support groups, and immediate crisis intervention to enable families to work and live with children and youth with SED.

Examples of family-responsive services include: (1) designating a single person to coordinate services for the family; (2) establishing single point of entry intake procedures for all services; (3) staffing technical assistance centers with family members; (4) expanding the role of families and care givers at IEP meetings and placing a family report on the agenda for the meetings; and (5) including families in outreach planning and cultural competency training.

STRATEGIC TARGET 5: PROMOTE APPROPRIATE ASSESSMENT

To promote practices ensuring that assessment is integral to the identification, design, and delivery of services for children and youth with SED. These practices should be culturally appropriate, ethical, and functional.

Appropriate, ongoing, cost-effective, and practical assessment is essential to improving outcomes for children and youth with serious emotional disturbance. Screening, monitoring, and assessment can identify children at risk, support preventive interventions that may reduce the need for formal identification at a later time, augment planning, and monitor the implementation of comprehensive services. Culturally competent, linguistically appropriate, multi-disciplinary assessments that involve families can help teachers build on student strengths and address the changing developmental needs of students with SED. Ongoing assessments that focus on the student's environment (including the school) can enable teachers and service providers to prevent emotional problems from intensifying, thus avoiding the need for more protracted and expensive interventions in the future.

The efficacy of service depends upon ongoing and continuous assessment that best captures a child's changing developmental needs. This target supports initiatives that provide for early identification and assessment tied to services rather than to labels. Identification and assessment frequently come too late and lead to the inappropriate placement, labelling, and treatment of students with emotional and behavioral problems.

This target addresses concerns that current assessments fail to identify the support and modifications necessary for the successful integration or re-integration of students with SED into regular education settings. The target supports the early screening and identification of children with emotional or behavioral problems by a multidisciplinary team of professionals and parents so that these children's problems are addressed before a cycle of failure, truancy, dropping out, and delinquency is established. This target supports practical and timely assessments that enable teachers and schools to use appropriate strategies and to assure that interventions are producing desired results.

Further, this target encourages the development of sensitive identification and assessment procedures to meet the needs of all children and prevent the exacerbation of emotional and behavioral problems. These procedures should be accurate, linguistically appropriate, and culturally fair and should provide necessary information to enable educators to provide appropriate educational experiences for all students with emotional and behavioral disorders. The target supports initiatives that use culturally appropriate and functional assessment data to strengthen the capacity of general education teachers and schools to effectively integrate and teach students with emotional and behavioral problems.

STRATEGIC TARGET 6: PROVIDE ONGOING SKILL DEVELOPMENT AND SUPPORT

To foster the enhancement of knowledge, understanding, and sensitivity among all who work with children and youth with and at risk of developing serious emotional disturbance. Support and development should be ongoing and aim at strengthening the capacity of families, teachers, service providers, and other stakeholders to collaborate, persevere, and improve outcomes for children and youth with SED.

Improving outcomes for students with SED will require new skills, approaches, and collaborations among all who work with these children and youth. Teachers and professionals frequently report feeling isolated and unsupported by colleagues and families. In addition, the need for comprehensive services coupled with the complex nature of serious emotional disturbance may create a gap between what is learned in teacher training programs and what teachers face in the classroom and in the school. Special and general educators as well as other service providers also require ongoing skill development and training that will enable them to work effectively with one another.

This strategic target provides for the ongoing support and professional development of teachers and other service providers in order to: (1) increase their capacity to teach and work effectively, (2) reduce their sense of isolation, and (3) enhance their commitment to meeting the needs of students with SED. Professional development for teachers and other service providers should extend to families in some cases so that all those working with children with SED can develop new skills, acquire knowledge of promising intervention techniques, and become aware of new innovations and practices.

An example of one strategy likely to support attainment of this target is that of field-based workshops promoting collaboration among families, teachers, aides, administrators, and mental health professionals. Well-managed workshops give participants the opportunity to share information and experiences regarding the diversity, the complexity of needs, and the potential for learning and growth of students with SED. Additionally, strategies that foster collaboration among teachers, families, and service providers can be effective pre-referral, early identification, and prevention tools. Other strategies may include mentoring, subsidized training time, and ongoing field-based training and consultation.

The implementation of this target will provide support for the other strategic targets, particularly those calling for collaborative relationships and culturally sensitive and competent services. It also will support the reorientation of professional roles and a preparedness to effectively serve children and youth with SED; and it will foster the development of attitudes and skills that are congruent with improved opportunities and outcomes for all children and youth with SED. Finally, achieving this target will provide ongoing support and professional development for teachers and other professionals, thus reducing their sense of isolation and fostering their commitment and persistence in meeting the challenging needs of the children and youth whom they serve.

STRATEGIC TARGET 7: CREATE COMPREHENSIVE AND COLLABORATIVE SYSTEMS

To promote systems change resulting in the development of coherent services built around the individual needs of children and youth with and at risk of developing serious emotional disturbance. These services should be family-centered, community-based, and appropriately funded.

As many children and youth with serious emotional disturbance and their families attempt to maneuver through a fragmented, confusing, and overlapping aggregation of services in education, mental health, health, substance abuse, welfare, youth services, correctional, and vocational agencies, they encounter and must endure competing definitions, regulations, and jurisdictions in a delivery system marked by formalism, categorical funding, and regulatory road blocks. To effectively plan, administer, finance, and deliver the necessary educational, mental health, social, and other support services to students and their families, coordination among the numerous agencies involved must increase and improve.

Systemic change is needed to enhance regional and community capacity to the point where those involved can meet all of the needs of children and youth with SED. Simultaneously, systems must be developed that can bring services into the child's environment, whether it be the home, school, or community. Furthermore, to achieve the desired outcomes for children and youth with SED, public and private funding streams must be coordinated.

This strategic target supports initiatives to help generate comprehensive and seamless systems of appropriate, culturally competent, mutually reinforcing services. This target envisions systems that are more than linkages of agencies. It aims instead at developing new systems, built around the needs of students, families, and communities — systems that coordinate services, articulate responsibility, and provide system-wide and agency-level accountability.

Local systems should remain school- and community-based so that they can respond to local needs and reflect the cultures of the communities they serve. Systems should be outcome oriented, employ uniform definitions, provide individualized and family-centered services, and respond promptly, flexibly, and effectively during any crisis. Within a coordinated, collaborative system, services follow needs, and funds follow children and their families. Students and their families should be able to enter the entire system from any point at which specific services are first offered. Finally, while the new systems should be community-based, policy must be coordinated at the state and national levels. Such coordination will eliminate bureaucratic road blocks, establish and reinforce commitment among agencies, and extend initiatives that coordinate previously non- or unaligned services and blend funding streams, both public and private.

Promising approaches toward systems development have addressed the need to nurture collaboration, innovation, and an outcome-oriented approach to planning and decision making. Some initiatives have done so successfully by involving children, teachers, and advocates in planning and evaluating new systems. Other efforts have provided policy makers with an opportunity for hands-on decision making regarding specific students so that they can understand the need to blend services and funding. Still other promising approaches provide common training and workshops to families, educators, human service workers, administrators, board members, and advocates in order to support collaboration, nourish transdisciplinary orientations, and sustain local networks.